

COMMUNAL-SECULAR QUESTION

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The defeat of the BJP has created such a widespread sense of relief among those committed to a vision of diverse and secular India, that the verdict has begun to appear as a verdict for secular politics. The poor showing of the BJP in Gujarat may strengthen this impression. In this context, the findings of the NES 2004 serve as a valuable corrective. It reminds us of the fact that the nature of public debate and opinion has undergone a change in the last decade or so. There has been a shifting of the middle ground of the debate in favour of majoritarian sentiments.

Responses to questions related to Gujarat bring this out. More people had heard about Godhara incident, than about the massacres that followed. Who got killed in these riots is perceived through communal lens. Hindus think that the only Hindus got killed in Godhara, while both Hindus and Muslims got killed in the riots. Muslims think otherwise. The sharp polarization comes across once again in assigning responsibility for Gujarat riots. The Muslims blame and government and, to a lesser degree, Hindu extremists. The Hindus, on the other hand, say that the Government and 'Muslim extremists' were responsible for riots in Gujarat. Interestingly, those Hindus who think only Muslims were killed in post-Godhara riots are more among the upper and middle caste. This indicates that RSS propaganda may have succeeded among the lower castes and classes.

At a general plane, popular opinions on the question of inter-community relations are at some distance from the commonly held modernist opinions on secularism. There is a widespread support for a ban on religious conversion, and not just among the Hindus. Similarly the idea of

banning inter-religious marriages is also supported across religions. Yes, there is a space here for living one's life in one's own community in one's own way. The idea of separate civil codes for each religion is also endorsed by the people. In principle, the idea that the state should protect the interests of the minorities is accepted. . But so is the idea that democracy is about majority community doing what it likes.

If secularism is about endorsing a modern view that refuses to see religious distinctions in the public domain, it runs the danger of becoming a view of the very few. Viewed from another vantage point, however, this election did result in a triumph of secularism, for the voters preferred to think of their mundane and material interests disregarding call to stick to religious identity. It is this version of secularism that provides a stronger guarantee against communal politics.